

Task Force Reserve Operations In Restricted Terrain

by Captain John J. Faria

"Visual estimate; swiftness; onslaught"

-Marshal Suvorov

The Task Force Reserve

According to FM 71-1, the task force reserve will, "Move in the depth of the task force formation. Its general location and possible missions are normally specified."¹ Typical missions for the reserve include assuming the mission of the main effort, attacking from a different location, supporting attacking company team(s) by fire, providing flank security, protecting key intersections and bridges, and blocking a counterattack.²

The reserve in severely restricted terrain³ has all of the same missions, but, these missions are much more difficult to accomplish. In severely restricted terrain, the task force normally will attack in a task force column. The reserve will typically be the trail element, often five to seven kilometers behind the lead element. In the defile, the frontage of the task force is often only one to three hundred meters. In other words, the task force main attack may be a single tank or tank platoon wide.

In order to successfully operate as the task force reserve, the company team commander must carefully analyze the task force mission and commander's intent to determine the most likely mission. Concurrent planning is a key skill. The team commander cannot wait for the one hundred percent solution from higher; he must prepare his own eighty percent solution based on the warning order and his own knowledge of the situation.

Route Security

Generally, the reserve commander's first mission will be to secure key terrain on the road march from the assembly area to the line of departure. Upon receipt of the movement order or warning order (warning order), the reserve commander must determine how to use his limited assets to secure the route. The enemy threat is most likely from light infantry and special operations forces overwatching hasty obstacles. The commander should do a careful map reconnaissance to determine the most likely positions from which light forces can conduct antiarmor ambushes along the route, and key choke points where a properly emplaced hasty obstacle can stop the task force.

With a typical task organization of three tank platoons, an engineer mobility squad, and four Bradley Stinger Fighting Vehicles (BSFV), the reserve can be tasked with the clearance and security of a 20-kilometer route. Through field experience in Korea and numerous simulation exercises, I found that each platoon must be given a specially tailored mission and organization. (Figure 1)

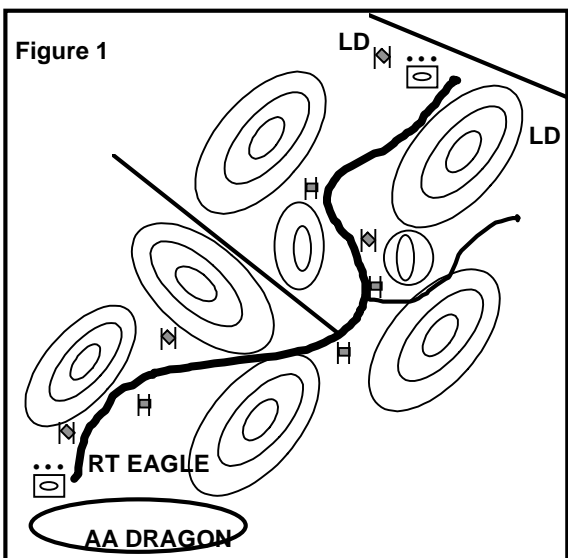
The lead element consists of a tank platoon with two plows and a mine roller, a BSFV, and the mobility squad. The lead platoon, under the commander's control, will clear the route of obstacles, conduct hasty bridge and ford classifications, and secure the line of departure by fire. The

BSFV provides protection against enemy air threats during any forward passage of lines.

The second tank platoon, with three BSFVs, will secure key intersections, bridges and choke points. The BSFVs will dismount Stinger teams to provide ADA coverage of the route, while the Bradley will be employed as a ground combat asset to secure key terrain against dismounted threats. The tank company commander must work closely with the ADA platoon leader to ensure the ADA umbrella covers the entire route. The third tank platoon, with a mine plow and roller, serves a dual purpose. The platoon will patrol the route to ensure it remains open, and if necessary, escort CSS assets to resupply the task force. It is important to note that enemy special operations forces and light infantry may allow mechanized forces to pass unmolested, and try to attack CSS assets as they move forward.

Attack From a Different Location

The second likely mission for the reserve is to "attack from a different location." This constitutes perhaps the most difficult and dangerous mission of the reserve in restricted terrain. In severely restricted terrain there is often only one avenue of approach available for the task force, usually a narrow defile. If the main attack is unable to advance, the task force commander does not have the luxury of introducing multiple companies into the fight along the



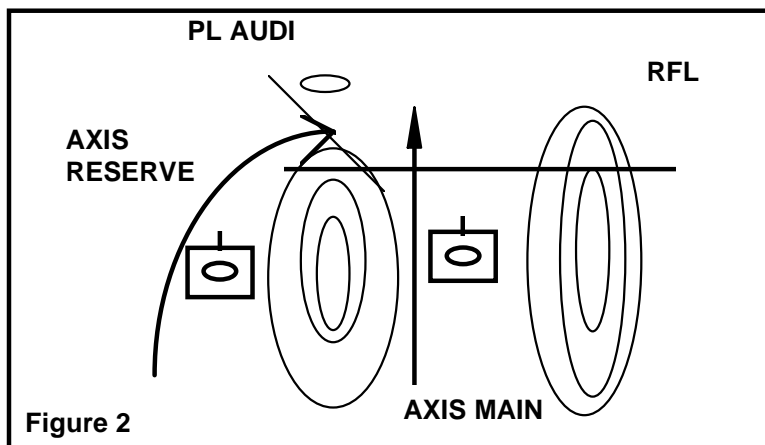


Figure 2

axis of attack. Often, if the lead tank platoon is unable to advance, another platoon cannot be committed much less another company.

In order to successfully prepare for the attack from a different direction, the reserve commander must begin his planning early. His first task is to conduct his own IPB. Of critical interest are lateral routes that will allow him to maneuver his company behind likely enemy locations. The key is to avoid the conventional wisdom as to what constitutes a tank-capable route. Often, the only available route into the enemy's flank or rear will be a "goat trail" only a single tank wide, over rough terrain. The reserve commander must do everything within his power to become familiar beforehand with the terrain where he is likely to fight. Terrain reconnaissance during peacetime is far more valuable than a map recon during war.

The reserve company commander must be aggressive in seeking out enemy information during the battle. It is unlikely that the scout platoon will be tasked to reconnoiter routes for the reserve, however, with prior coordination, the scouts can conduct hasty reconnaissance of routes identified by the reserve commander during his zone recon for the main effort. Prior to his commitment, the reserve commander must have as clear a picture as possible of his routes and the enemy situation to the task force flanks.

The final major planning factor in this type of attack is to avoid fratricide. All company teams and fire support teams must be aware of the reserve's attack route and objective. These should be identified as no-fire areas. In addition, restricted fire lines should be coordinated (preferably before the battle) to avoid fratricide. A method in use by the Dragon Force is to designate companies as direct fire "hot" (free to fire) or "cold" (will not fire). As an example, when the committed reserve crosses Phase Line Audi, they are main gun hot and the lead company team is main gun cold. (Figure 2)

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Block a Counterattack

A key mission of the reserve in the offense is to block counterattacks, either on the flanks, or during con-

solidation. The key to this mission, like all other reserve missions, is prior planning and IPB. The success of the reserve team in the blocking mission is determined by how quickly they can transition from a column formation to a line, or an "L" shaped ambush at attack-by-fire positions on defensible terrain. To facilitate success, the reserve commander must first identify likely enemy counterattack routes. (Figure 3) Next, he must do a careful terrain analysis to determine the intervisibility lines that provide the best defensible terrain, and distribute likely attack-by-fire positions to the task force and his platoons. Finally, the reserve company must rehearse the rapid transition from a company column to a company line.

Assume the Mission of the Main Effort

Assuming the mission of the main effort is the most intricate and difficult reserve mission in the offense. All leaders in the reserve team must be familiar with the mission of the main effort, and must plan for and rehearse it. What makes the mission most difficult in restricted terrain is physically getting to the battle. Unlike open terrain, where the reserve can pass around the committed unit, the reserve may very well have to pass through the committed company when in restrictive terrain, possibly while in contact with the enemy.

In order to pass through a unit in contact, the mission must be rehearsed at the task force level. Using FM communications, the two commanders must determine a battle handover line for the direct-fire battle. If possible, the lead company platoon with the best support-by-fire position should operate on the reserve team command net to facilitate accurate delivery of direct fires. Finally, one fire support team must assume control over all indirect fires. During the passage it is often advantageous to have the stationary FIST control indirect fires while operating on the reserve unit's command net.

In the defense, the reserve mission is no less difficult. The reserve commander and task force commander must identify a central location for the reserve, allowing them to be committed to more than one blocking position. The reserve must rehearse movement to all possible attack by fire positions, under daylight, night, and MOPP 4 conditions. All tank commanders should be familiar with routes into and out of their positions. The reserve com-

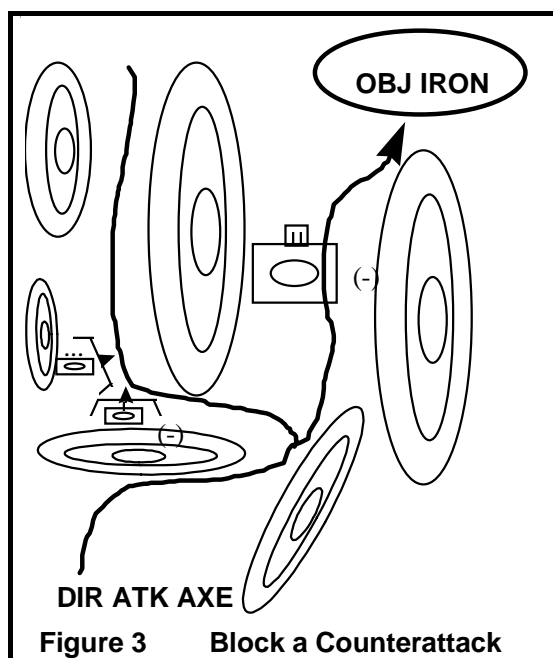


Figure 3 Block a Counterattack

mander must coordinate with the team commanders he is likely to reinforce, in order to determine the best routes into their defensive sector, with minimum masking of fires. If time permits, the unit should conduct a full-scale task force rehearsal on the ground in order to familiarize every soldier in the task force with the reserve's likely movement.

Conclusions

Under the best of conditions, the reserve has the most challenging mission in the task force. In restricted terrain, the mission is further complicated by limited routes, numerous passages of lines sometimes while under direct and indirect fire, and the risk of fratricide. The reserve commander must conduct rapid parallel planning and a thorough IPB (Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield). He cannot wait for the task force order to prepare his team. The reserve commander must coordinate with all the commanders in the task force for passage of lines. Leaders in the reserve element must be familiar with the mission of every unit in the task force, all routes in the task force area of operations, and must maintain constant situational awareness. Like most missions, the keys to the reserve's success are prior planning, detailed rehearsals, and flexibility. As the great Russian General Suvorov once said, "The reserve commander must be capable of conducting a quick visual estimate, attacking with swiftness, and crushing the enemy with the onslaught of his forces."

Notes

¹FM 71-1, *The Company Team*, p. 3-13.

²Ibid., p. 3-13.

³FM 34-130, *Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield*, p. 2-15.

Captain John Faria is a 1989 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy. He has served as a tank platoon leader and tank company XO in 3d Battalion (Airborne), 73d Armor, 82d Airborne Division, to include during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. He served as S3 Air and B Company Commander, 2-72 Armor, 2d ID, and currently commands HHC, 2-72 Armor.